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Paper Proposal

TITLE: Networks of Higher Education Institutions: a social network approach to the study of governance arrangements

Track 1 | paper proposal

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Purpose of this paper: Higher education institutions (HEIs) are faced with changing governance practices, where the relationship between HEIs and government has transformed (Neave & Van Vught 1991; Gornitzka & Maassen 2000). These new governance arrangements have allowed HEIs new levels of autonomy to realize teaching and research goals (Enders 2004). HEIs navigate these governance changes through development of new relationships with a variety of stakeholders (Beerkens 2002; Clark 2003; Lundval 2009; Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff 1995). Although the networks of HEIs are said to be telling for explaining the performance of HEIs (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009; Heitor 2008); literature on HEIs' networks has largely focused on the capacity for innovation through university-industry cooperation (Shane 2004; Calvert & Patel 2003) leaving knowledge about these networks incomplete. In order to gain a better understanding into these networks, building on the current descriptive and comparative case studies of these governance arrangements, a more systematic approach to investigating these relationships is necessary.

In this study I outline how a social network approach (Borgatti & Foster 2003) advances the knowledge we can garner from the study of governance arrangements. Social network theory assumes that actors (e.g. individuals or organizations) create social structures in their exercise of agency that then constrain them (Giddens 1984); where the characteristics, positions and structures of these networks have consequences on performance, innovation, and success (Burt 2004; Coleman 1988; Granovetter 1985). I show that such an approach – that considers the precise differences in the composition of these networks, yields concrete insights that contribute to confirming mechanisms about the emergence of governance arrangements and of how HEIs network to achieve their performance goals.

Design/methodology/approach: A network is a representation of a set of relations between entities; in this case the relationships that a HEI has for example with other HEIs, industry, individuals, formal research networks, government bodies, and/or supra-national bodies. Through a meta-analysis of the characteristics of HEIs networks: identified through a number structural measurements - density, network size, and constraint (Borgatti, Jones & Everett 1998) a typology is developed. The analysis of social networks is grounded in empirical data. The individual (ego) networks of 112 UK HEIs are investigated in this study through the lens of acknowledged relationships through recent hyperlinks to classify network structures.

Findings: Findings from this study show that HEIs employ a diversity of different network structures and can be classified into different clusters related to their characteristics. This typology allows us to question in future research on how these network structures relate to traditionally studied dimensions of HEIs – such as universities and polytechnics, affiliations with associations, and age; as well as the consequences for these networks – do dense networks yield greater research quality or teaching performance rankings.

What is original/value of paper: Social network analysis has been presented to HE researchers as a framework to aid in systematic studies of a number of higher education phenomena (Kezar 2014; Biancani & McFarland 2013); although no studies to our knowledge have pursued a structural ego network approach presented here. This study is part of a developing a research line implementing quantitative social network analysis to systematically investigate the antecedents and consequences of the governance arrangements of HEIs.

Keywords: governance arrangements, networks, social network analysis

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Biographical Details: Julie M. Birkholz is a Post-Doctoral Researcher at the Centre for Higher Education Governance Ghent (CHEGG). She recently completed her PhD research on social network dynamics. Her current research focuses on the conditions that influence organization structures of higher education institutions and the effects of these structures on implementing higher education tasks using a social network approach.